

IMPROVING ENGLISH VOCABULARY TEACHING IN A CHINESE UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT

Hou Yu-jing

*English Department, Yantai University Wenjing College,
Yantai, Shandong, China*

Abstract

Vocabulary-focusing idea in L2 language acquisition has long been proposed by researchers all over the world, while English vocabulary teaching in Chinese university still remains de-emphasized, especially when compared to the elaborate grammar instruction. Based on the scientific attitude towards vocabulary teaching, the outlines of some principles that should be considered while developing a vocabulary component in a language course under a Chinese university environment are suggested including how to choose appropriate vocabulary-improving materials and how to design a recycling teaching syllabus. Discussing from the pragmatic perspective, the combination of 'book flood' program together with intensively vocabulary teaching would probably work for Chinese college students.

Keywords: English vocabulary teaching, cost-benefit teaching syllabus, pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

The vocabulary-focused idea 'Without grammar little can be conveyed; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed' has been reckoned by numerous vocabulary researchers. As Lewis (2000) states, the essential distinction between high and lower level of language learners is the size of their lexicons. It is obvious that one of the most important tasks facing all English learners is acquiring sufficient vocabulary which can satisfy their needs. Goulden, Nation, and Read (1990) counted the number of word families in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (1963) and found that the dictionary contained about 54,000 word families after excluding

Direct all correspondence to:

Hou Yu-jing, Building One Room 419, English Department, Yantai University Wenjing College, Yantai, Shandong, China 264200

entries such as proper names and alternative spellings. Such a depressing huge number of word items make it an impossible task for teachers to teach students all of them. Nevertheless, it definitely is the English teachers' responsibility to make an effort to expand students' vocabulary knowledge.

This article aims to explore means of improving L2 vocabulary teaching and to outline some principles that should be considered while developing a vocabulary component in a language course under a Chinese university environment. There are three sections that compose this article with each of them in a problem-and-solution format by first presenting and analyzing a nonscientific way that Chinese English teachers often adopt in vocabulary teaching and then trying to figure out reasonable solutions for the problem. These solutions, however, are not necessarily right or applicable for every English class and may not contribute to improving English vocabulary teaching of all Chinese universities. The truth is, as Schmitt (2000) points out, the best vocabulary teaching practice in any situation depends on different levels of students' proficiency, the targeted words, the school system and curriculum, and many other factors.

HOLDING A SCIENTIFIC ATTITUDE TO WHAT VOCABULARY TO TEACH

It is probably true that most English teachers in Chinese universities have never bothered with the question of 'what vocabulary to teach'. A large majority of them just concentrate on the limited mandatory word list after each text or framed by education authorities. This fact can be problematic at least from two aspects. For one thing, not all the words in word lists qualify the same valuable teaching time as some of the high frequency words. Some of them have such a low frequency that students will hardly meet them again in their future reading. For another, there are plenty of other words that deserve teaching time and needed to be mastered by students not appearing in the lists. As a matter of fact, university language teachers have chances to improve students' vocabulary learning efficiency by adopting Nation's (1995) cost-benefit idea and utilizing other appropriate vocabulary-improving materials.

TEACHING VOCABULARY FROM THE COST-BENEFIT PROSPECTS

Generally speaking, Chinese university students have the knowledge of the most frequent 2,000 word families and all fundamental grammatical rules which secured their success of passing the National University Entrance Examination before they entered university. The guideline of the

National University Entrance Examination prescribed by China Education Bureau is available at <http://yfetr.edugd.cn/ReadNews.asp?NewsID=247>. Nation (1995) holds the view that the first 2,000 most frequent words are essential for any real language use and the increase of comprehensible input. A vocabulary of about 2,000 words, however, can only serve as a starting-point. The next step for university English learners is acquiring enough vocabulary to begin to read authentic texts. Based on the frequency of each word in written English, Laufer's (1989) research shows that the level of 3,000 word families including derivations and inflected forms make it possible for learners to be familiar with 90%-95% in the given text, whereas Nation (2001) argues it is the level of 4,000 word families that big enough helping readers to achieve this. The consensus seems to be that 3,000-5,000 word families are able to provide initial access to this kind of written material, while if a learner's goal is to develop a native-like vocabulary size, then 15,000-20,000 word families is necessary (Nation & Waring, 1997).

Since Chinese university students generally have a vocabulary level of 2,000 words, teachers will play a particularly important role in helping them further achieve 3,000-5,000 word family levels, at which they will be better able to read authentic texts. In another word, these words deserve to be deliberately taught and studied. As for the 570 academic words which students come across frequently in academic reading and writing, teachers should also consider spending class time on these words because it is important for students to understand them in reading as well as using them in academic writing (Nation & Gu, 2007). Regarding the large number of low frequency words, they probably not worth the limited teaching time under most circumstances. It is better for teachers to train students in strategies and let students study these words on their own through a combination of extensive reading and explicit self-study after class. Guessing from context, learning word roots and affixes, and applying mnemonic techniques are three strategies that he believes are especially useful (Nation, 1990). It is especially meaningful for the ambitious students who want to achieve native-like vocabulary proficiency. As to the technical words, some researchers to agree that they need to be taught and learned while studying the subject. Despite of this fact, in EFL university environment such as Chinese universities, students come across the majority of technical words of their fields in Chinese. There is no necessity of acquiring the English counterparts for learners unless they are eager to read some advanced materials in their fields. Moreover, students from different academic fields need completely different technical vocabulary a that is far beyond the knowledge of university English teachers. Therefore, in Chinese university environment, it may make more sense if students, who need

technical words, learn these words on their own by taking the advantage of dictionaries or other vocabulary learning skills.

CHOOSING APPROPRIATE VOCABULARY-IMPROVING MATERIALS

Besides teaching textbooks, in the Chinese university context, English teachers still have opportunities to select some appropriate reading materials which may be helpful and suitable for students in their vocabulary learning. The Chinese edition of level six in the Oxford Bookworms series, for example, can be recommended for students who just enter the university. First of all, the level six in the Oxford Bookworms series contains 2,000-3,000 words, while at the same time ensures that the vocabulary is systematically recycled. Therefore, by using this, teachers can improve their students' vocabulary not only by deepening their quality of knowledge of the 2,000 words they have known but also by providing a number of opportunities for meeting new words. Secondly, the Chinese edition of the Oxford Bookworms series include marginal glosses (the provision of Chinese translation of the unknown words), which could be a strongpoint as well. One study conducted by Hulstijn, Hollander & Greidanus (1996) shows that the advanced language learners using the reading material with marginal glosses almost double the vocabulary retention of those without the help of marginal glosses.

Beyond any doubt, class time is always limited. Teaching vocabulary in class by using these extra materials may be not realistic in many cases. It seems to be more productive if teachers let students do these reading as homework and discover new words' meaning by themselves, then afterwards elaborate, expand, and consolidate these words in the classroom (Schmitt, 2000). Some classroom activities, which require deep processing and provide opportunities of re-encountering words, can be designed to facilitate vocabulary acquisition. In this case, students not only learn words but also experience what Resnick (1989) calls a 'cognitive apprenticeship'. In this apprenticeship, it is better for teachers to make learners realize that vocabulary acquisition is a task that involves their active participation, collaborates with classmates and consists of personal, quiet, self-reflective periods as well.

DESIGNING AN EFFICIENT VOCABULARY TEACHING SYLLABUS

A Recycling Teaching Syllabus with Richer Vocabulary Instructions

Another way of teaching vocabulary employed by a large number of Chinese English teachers is that they prefer teaching new words individually through definition-based vocabulary instructions. What's more, they usually teach words only once due to the limited teaching time. When we analyze this way of teaching vocabulary, at least three disadvantages show up.

First of all, as McCarthy (1990) indicates, new knowledge is most efficiently absorbed when it is assimilated with what is already known and when the appropriate schemata are activated in the mind of the learner. On the contrary, teaching words individually neither attaches new information to the preexisting long-term memory nor provides any knowledge of word families or word parts, which can be one of the very important word study strategies in helping learners quickly increase their vocabulary size (Nation, 2001).

Taking the word 'mine' for example, before teachers introduce its meaning in the text about 'miners', which is a real text in a Chinese university English textbook, he/she may first mention the meaning that everybody knows as 'my possess', and then create a way that would relate it with the new meaning 'excavation for extracting coal and other precious stones'. Afterwards, 'mine', as a verb which means 'dig in the ground', can be introduced, and finally a word family of 'mine', including 'miner', 'mineral', 'mineralogy', should be provided with some knowledge of word parts (e.g. '-er' as a suffix usually represents some kind of people, while '-logy' sometimes means a kind of scientific study). Moreover, the image of miners in the textbook picture could further enhance the memory of the word 'miner'. If it is possible, some relative video materials could be presented as well. Hatch and Brown's (1995) expatiate that if students could work with interactive video materials, they learn significantly faster than learning in the script or merely in the instruction exercises.

Secondly, there are some limitations of definition-based vocabulary instruction, although this 'parsimonious' model is widely used by teachers since it is easier and even effective for learning a great deal of vocabulary in a short time (Nagy, 1997; Schmitt, 1997). Definitions are decontextualized, abstract, and general because they are assigned a single sentence to cover a wide range of meaning variants. Simply memorizing brief definition hardly leads to great depth of word knowledge. Therefore, pedagogically useful definitions should be connected with the effect that a word contains in

different sentences. Using meaning-bearing comprehensible input (e.g. words paraphrasing, multiple examples, repeating sentences) while presenting new words can help to promote L2 vocabulary learning (Bancroft, 2004).

Last but not the least, a single instruction of vocabulary would neither produce long-term memory nor cause great depth of word knowledge. It requires 5-16 or more repetitions for a word to be learned (Nation, 1990, p. 44). As a result, if recycling is neglected, many partially known words which were taught previously will be forgotten and waste all the time and effort already put into teaching them. Understanding how memory works in vocabulary acquisition is very instructive for teachers to design programs that benefit from the revision time most. The concept of 'expanding rehearsal' suggests that the learners should revise new material soon after their initial meeting of it and should then recall it at gradually increasing intervals. One research suggests revision sessions five to ten minutes after the study period; then 24 hours later, then one week later, one month later and, finally, six months later (Russell, 1979, p. 149). This is certainly one of the key points for syllabus designers to bear in mind from two aspects. On the one hand, learners should be made aware of the learning advantages of this method, and hence they can consciously use this method to improve their vocabulary learning. On the other, the teaching program itself should also build on repetition at increasing intervals. For example, English teachers can reserve the last ten minutes of the class and ask students to silently review the words they have learned during the class. Otherwise, students will probably forget a large proportion of what they learned before walking out of the classroom.

Syllabus Combines 'Book Flood' Program' with Intensively Vocabulary Teaching

Another point that is also worth teachers' attention is that mere classroom repetition is not enough for learners, and the repetition does not happen to nearly as great an extent for less frequent words. Consequently, teachers should look for ways to arouse learners' enthusiasm gaining more input to offset this (Schmitt, 2000). The consensus on how to do this is encouraging the students to do more reading. A study shows that extensive reading can benefit learners with both high and lower proficiencies and it serves as a technique for coping with the vast amount of vocabulary to be learned, particularly at university level (Tekmen & Daloglu, 2006). A large amount of vocabulary learning occurs when a word is encountered repeatedly in contexts. If learners meet an unknown word ten times in context, sizeable learning gains may take place. Furthermore, the

incensement not only happens in quantity. The repetition in reading also positively affects the intermediate EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge of orthography, meaning, form, association, syntax, and grammatical functions (Webb, 2007).

A 'book flood' program (Elley, 1991), which allows students to choose what they like to read and takes students interests into account, can be a motivating program started by language teachers. Due to the fact that learning new words is not instant but requires repetition and conscious study, it is probably a good idea that teachers ask students to keep record of what they have read and create their own vocabulary notebook which will provide a useful reference for later study (Thornbury, 2002). Meanwhile, one thing that teachers should bear in mind and check for their students is that books in the book flood program must meet students' proficiency. The precondition for this program is readers must know the great majority of words to enjoy reading and to infer successfully (Nagy, 1997).

Syllabus Design from a Pragmatic Perspective

The differences in culture and customs have never gained enough attention in Chinese vocabulary teaching, even in universities. Language has always considered as a part of culture, and it is a part of the language teachers' responsibility to explain language knowledge and cultural knowledge at the same time, so as for the students to achieve appropriateness in language use.

Kellerman (1986) suggests that learners do seem to assume that the core meaning senses of translation equivalents are the same across languages, but that more peripheral, irregular, or idiomatic uses are not. Swan (1997), however, further proposes that these intuitions can be sharpened by making learners more aware of the similarities and differences between the native language and the target language, and that teaching should help learners formulate realistic hypotheses about the nature and limits of crosslinguistic correspondences so that they can be attentive to important categories in the second language which have no mother-tongue counterpart. Take a very frequently used Chinese saying break the sand-pot and ask until the end as an example. This is a phrase which means keep asking about every tiny detail about one thing. The first part of the saying ('break the sand-pot') obviously does not make sense for Western people, and no English counterparts can be found. Therefore, teachers should explain clearly to their students the reason why the word 'sand-pot' would not be proper if it appears in translation.

In a word, the combination of intensive vocabulary teaching in class and incidental learning through extensive reading should always be

highlighted in vocabulary syllabus design. Meanwhile, the pragmatic aspect in vocabulary teaching is worth language teachers' consideration as well.

TRAINING VOCABULARY LEARNING SKILLS

Training vocabulary learning skills is often neglected in universities vocabulary learning classes. Chinese at this can be a great loss for learners since strategy offers promise of larger gains in learning for a relatively smaller investment in teaching time. Ultimately, vocabulary is learned by individual students and teachers are not able to teach all the words students need. As Oxford (1990, p. 8) demonstrates, "strategies are specific actions taken by the learners to make learning faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations". Nisbet and Tindall (2005) conduct a study among Chinese university students and find a significant relationship between students' language learning strategies and language proficiency. A similar result also reveals in Park's (1997) study among Korean university students. From this perspective, training students to learn to effectively control their own vocabulary learning is a necessity. There are a number of effective learning strategies, but due to the words limitation of this article, only the strategy of using a dictionary will be emphasized since one of the most important skills that Chinese university teachers assume all their students are good at is using a dictionary. As a matter of fact, most students do not know when to use a dictionary. Many students turn to a dictionary whenever they meet an unknown word in their reading instead of first utilizing the techniques of guessing from context, which should have been more emphasized by Chinese language teachers. Several studies showed that excessive use of dictionaries may destroy the fluency of reading process because reading becomes sheer word by word decoding. Good learners basically use a dictionary to confirm meaning of the unknown words after guessing from context (Hulstijn, 1993; Scholfield, 1997). From this angle, excessive use of dictionaries, especially electronic dictionaries which are faster and more convenient, may have negative effects in reading, and hence harms vocabulary learning in the long run. Regarding the impact of electronic dictionary use on vocabulary learning, remarkably few studies have actually been done on it since it is a relatively new phenomenon.

It is true that there are still plenty of other vocabulary learning strategies that teachers could choose from and use to train their students to be better learners. In the vocabulary strategy training, however, one thing is worth keeping in mind. Strategy use is highly individual. It could be dangerous for teachers to require students a uniform way of using a strategy. In one word, keeping motivation high while encouraging and training

students to develop strategies that they would like to persist in using once they leave the classroom should be essential to Chinese university vocabulary teaching.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, let us first emphasize the importance of vocabulary in second language acquisition. Bancroft (2004, p. 201) proposes a vocabulary-focused idea in L2 instruction suggesting that L2 acquisition should shift from grammar plus other types of competence to vocabulary plus other types of competence. In a Chinese university environment, where all basic grammatical knowledge has been taught in high school, this vocabulary-focused idea seems to be highly reasonable. Secondly, it is worthy highlighting the incremental nature of vocabulary learning. The implication of this is, besides the completely new words, learners also expand the existing knowledge of the L2 words. When attempting to enhance this partial knowledge, vocabulary learning will depend on what the learner already knows, and how well the learner wishes to know the word. In a word, vocabulary teaching means more than just teaching new words; it also involves nurturing partially known words along to the point where learners can use them at will. Lastly, a scientific vocabulary program design should integrate explicit teaching and incidental learning, and take learner's training program into consideration. Effective training must be tailored to the particular situation, taking into account the age, motivation, proficiency and desires of the students. It seems reasonable to introduce them to a variety of strategies and let them select the right ones for them. Obviously, there is no one right way of designing efficient vocabulary teaching syllabus under a Chinese university environment. Teachers should consider many factors in an integrated way, and endeavor to make their vocabulary programs suit their own contexts.

THE AUTHOR

Hou Yu-jing holds an MA in Applied Linguistics from the University of Nottingham, UK. Applied Linguistics. Now she works at the English Department of Yantai University Wenjing College as a teaching assistant.

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